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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 007885

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: A/S WELCH DISCUSSES IRAQ, PALESTINE, AND SYRIA  
WITH EGYPTIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: CAIRO 7749

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (C) During an October 9 meeting with NEA A/S Welch, Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit expressed pessimism about the near-term outlook in Iraq, but affirmed support for a comprehensive Arab diplomatic approach aimed at preserving national unity and promoting reconciliation. The Foreign Minister cautioned that recent images of U.S. military operations in Western Iraq were fanning anger across the Arab world. On Syria, Aboul Gheit said Egypt was working to influence the SARG's behavior but warned against opening a "third center of trouble" in an already volatile region. End summary.

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Israel-Palestine  
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12. (C) Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit solicited U.S. views on the next steps forward in Israel-Palestine in the post-Gaza withdrawal period. A/S Welch told the Foreign Minister that he believed the upcoming summit between Prime Minister Sharon and President Abu Mazen was an important signal that a political process between the two parties would continue to move forward. The U.S. hopes that both sides will be able address each other with confidence and dignity, he added. A/S Welch noted the concurrent presence in Cairo of Special Envoy Wolfensohn, charged by President Bush with overseeing U.S. assistance to promote stability and good governance in the Gaza strip (whom Aboul Gheit had received earlier on October 9 - septel).

13. (C) Aboul Gheit expressed Egyptian annoyance with a reported recent statement by the IDF's Director of Military Intelligence, asserting that extremists had taken advantage of Israel's withdrawal to step up smuggling of weapons from Egypt in Gaza. Aboul Gheit told A/S Welch that Egypt had sought from the GOI clarification of the statement and had been told that the official had referred to alleged smuggling that had taken place in the initial period after the withdrawal rather than after GOE security forces had established order along the border. The MFA had since circulated Israel's "clarification" to the Egyptian media, the Foreign Minister stated.

14. (C) A/S Welch opined that, on balance, things were moving in a positive direction, noting that President Mubarak had told him earlier this morning (septel) that Israeli Defense Minister Mofaz would soon visit Cairo. The Israeli MOD had firm control of the Gaza withdrawal operation and had operated effectively, A/S Welch observed, expecting that it would continue to play a constructive role in the political process that lay ahead. Two areas in which the USG hopes to see progress soon are in withdrawals from Palestinian towns and in easing the burden on Palestinians transiting IDF checkpoints. Progress on each issue will strengthen Abu Mazen's hand he asserted, noting that the Palestinian President continues to enjoy significant public support. For the Israelis, everything depends on security. As long as acts of Palestinian violence and terror can be preempted, many things will be possible.

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Syria  
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15. (C) A/S Welch told Aboul Gheit that Syria was acting in a manner that endangered progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, and was also taking actions that threatened to destabilize Lebanon and further enflame the situation in Iraq. President Asad's very public feting of leaders of Palestinian extremist groups in early September was not an isolated event, he cautioned. There is also significant evidence of Syrian facilitation of new weapons transfers into the hands of Palestinian extremists in Lebanon, and planning by the Islamic Jihad organization, with Syrian support, of new acts of terror against Israel. Aboul Gheit initially

demurred in the discussion, saying that he need not repeat what President Mubarak had told A/S Welch earlier that morning (septel).

16. (C) However, the Foreign Minister returned to the subject of Syria later in the meeting, expressing concern that the U.S., if it acted too aggressively, risked creating a "third center of trouble" in an already volatile region. A/S Welch told his host that he expected the Syrian case would become "more complicated" in the near future, with the anticipated mid-October release of the Mehlis report, which would likely implicate Syria in the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. A/S Welch foresaw Security Council discussion, and possible Security Council action, in response to the report.

17. (C) Aboul Gheit affirmed that Egypt was engaged in a high level dialogue with Syria aimed at improving the SARG's positions on key issues. The U.S. should also open a frank dialogue with Syria, he suggested. The release of the UN report may present a new opportunity to influence Syrian actions, Aboul Gheit opined. A/S Welch told the Foreign Minister that U.S. dialogue with Syria had been tried and failed. In Washington's view, A/S Welch continued, ignoring Syria's destabilizing actions in the region was more risky than confronting Damascus. Drawing the Foreign Minister's attention to President Bush's latest remarks on Syria, A/S Welch cautioned that and the White House remained very skeptical of Syria's intentions and that all options remained open to the President.

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Iraq  
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18. (C) A/S Welch described the coming 3-4 month period as a particularly delicate one for Iraq and welcomed recent moves to step up Arab diplomatic engagement there. Arab states can play an important and constructive role in creating a "center" in Iraq, helping Iraqis build a national consensus for cooperation and stability, he stated. The U.S. was encouraged by the recent Arab League announcement that it would send a mission to Baghdad, A/S Welch added.

19. (C) Aboul Gheit said "something must be done to preserve Iraqi national unity." The Arab League proposal to hold an international conference in Cairo aimed at promoting an Iraqi national reconciliation process was fully supported by Egypt. However, such a conference required determined, deliberate and thorough preparations, he continued. To this end, Arab League envoy Ben Heli, an Algerian diplomat, was already in Baghdad, where he was finding both Sunnis and Shi'a eager "to bring the Arab League into their camp," according to the Foreign Minister. Though Arab League SYG Amr Moussa had initially announced he would visit Baghdad by October 15, he had subsequently rethought the idea and dispatched Ben Heli on a preparatory mission. Aboul Gheit expected that Moussa would himself visit Baghdad, but not until the end of the holy month of Ramadan (which concludes on November 3).

110. (C) On the overall Arab approach, Aboul Gheit told A/S Welch he saw three core issues that needed to be addressed simultaneously: resolving inter-communal conflicts, establishing a sustainable political process, and addressing the issue of foreign military occupation. The importance of the later issue should not be underestimated, Aboul Gheit asserted, recalling the bitter debate in the Arab public over the legitimacy and legality of the foreign military presence. The Foreign Minister envisioned that progress on this issue might be realized by proposing a tentative timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces, perhaps within 24 months, conditioned on the concurrent development of Iraq security force capabilities.

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Iraq and the Media  
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111. (C) Diplomatic efforts notwithstanding, Aboul Gheit said he was gloomy about the near-term prospects in Iraq. He expected the upcoming constitutional referendum would "do nothing to reduce the violence." A/S Welch agreed that fighting would continue, adding that U.S. and coalition forces "would be stepping it up in some places." "Be careful about that," Aboul Gheit cautioned in response. Recent images of U.S. military operations in western Iraq were enflaming the emotions of Arabs across the region, he stated, citing a particular clip that had aired recently on Al-Jazeera TV, showing a group of Iraqi civilians, including a beleaguered mother carrying her baby. "This footage alone will lead a thousand Arab youths to volunteer for Iraq (as insurgents)," he asserted.

112. (C) The Foreign Minister also told A/S Welch that the U.S. should be cautious in its use of terms like "Islamic terrorism," citing President Bush's October 6 speech. "We can understand when you refer to Islamist terrorism," he

stated, "but you should refer to terror as Islamic - Islam is something different...We never heard of 'Catholic terrorism' in Ireland."

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More Media Issues - Sawa and Manar  
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113. (C) A/S Welch raised with the Foreign Minister U.S. concerns about the incitement continuously broadcast on Al-Manar, the Hizballah TV station carried on GOE-owned Nilesat. Aboul Gheit, who had discussed the issue at length with Ambassador Ricciardone on October 5 (reftel), assured A/S Welch "I'm working on it."

114. (C) For his part, Aboul Gheit expressed GOE concern about draft U.S. legislation linking assistance to Egypt to progress on erecting an FM transmitter in Cairo to carry the signal for the U.S.-funded station Radio Sawa. "We object to this kind of arm twisting," the Foreign Minister stated, "it will complicate a solution."

RICCIARDONE